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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes a 4-month-long preparation process to implement an innovative English-as-a-Second-Language workplace program (ESLWP) at a large university with a sizable non-English speaking workforce in the United States. There is also a proposed plan of action for implementing a program guided by constructivist views of teaching and learning a second language. The program was never tried, tested, or evaluated. However, the insights gained from the experience seemed valuable for other ESLWP designers. Following are aspects related to the implementation of the program presented in this paper: theoretical principles; steps and guidelines; alternative assessment and portfolios; and implications for other ESL methods class instructors working in similar settings. A checklist for implementing an innovative ESLWP is appended. (Contains 19 references.) (Author/SM)

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CREATING AN INNOVATIVE ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN WORKPLACE PROGRAM

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The present paper summarizes a four-month-long preparation process to implement an innovative ESL workplace program (ESLWP) at a large university with a sizeable non-English speaking workforce in the United States. The reader will also find a proposed plan of action for implementing a program guided by constructivist views of teaching and learning a second language. The program was never tried, tested, or evaluated. However, the insights gained from the experience seemed valuable for other ESLWP designers. Following are the aspects related to the implementation of the program presented in this paper: theoretical principles; steps and guidelines; alternative assessment and portfolios; and implications for other ESL methods class instructors working in similar settings.

Introduction

The paper you are about to read summarizes a four-month-long preparation process to implement an innovative ESL workplace program (ESLWP) at a large university in the United States. Although the program was never tried, tested, or evaluated, the designers decided that some insights were gained from the experience. The purpose of this paper is to share with the readers the most important aspects of the four-month journey into the design of an ESLWP.

This program was meant to be the result of a joint effort of four parties: 1) the International Students Office on campus, 2) the Office of Human Resources, 3) the employees at the Food & Housing and the Physical Plant divisions, and 4) the instructor of the ESL graduate methods class. The International Students Office would provide a

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great service to the local community by offering its facilities to teach the classes. The Office of Human Resources would profit from this program since the project would fulfill the language training needed for the university employees. The ESL employees would clearly benefit from the program because it should help them improve the language proficiency level they need at work. Finally, the student-teachers in the ESL graduate methods class would benefit by acquiring and developing teaching skills including ESL in the work place.

According to Boiarsky (1996), many American schools have been incorporating some form of English for the workplace into the curriculum. Workplace English has been present in traditional course work through the introduction of work-related reading and writing formats (memoranda to supervisors, letters to customers, and proposals for improving company effectiveness) and by providing literacy skills needed in specific work environments.

The ultimate goal of the program was to equip the learners with appropriate language tools in order to become more effective language users in their workplace. So-mui & Mead (2000) reported that addressing the ESL employees' needs according to their workplace context should be compulsory for the designers of any ESLWP. They researched the workplace English needs of textile and clothing merchandisers who communicated in the international marketplace. They also presented the design of a curriculum that matched their population's specific workplace needs. More importantly, the types of communication that differed markedly from those included in traditional business English courses were identified and discussed.

As suggested by the above researchers, this ESLWP curriculum would address learners' needs in their daily work-routines. For example, workplace related language interactions and functions such as oral interaction with customers, reading the menu or labels of chemical products, and writing a letter or a memorandum would be addressed in the lessons.

Moreover, the present program was designed as an inquiry-based curriculum. According to Schwarzer & Luke (2001), "the inquiry cycle is a student-centered approach to teaching and learning which begins with students self-selecting or generating a question or set of questions about a topic that interests them" (p. 2). Students should be

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given the opportunity to choose the topics that they would like to explore, becoming the protagonists of their own learning. Accordingly, the role of the teacher should be redefined as a guide and a fellow inquirer in the learning process.

Following is a list of the stages of the inquiry cycle process (Short et al., 1996): building from the known: browsing, talking and listening; taking time to find questions for inquiry: wandering and wondering, experience centers, observing and exploring; gaining new perspectives: inquiry groups, in-depth researching, tools for inquiry, studio time; attending to difference: revision on inquiry, learning logs; sharing what was learned: inquiry presentations; planning new inquiries: group reflection, reflection portfolios, strategy lessons; and taking thoughtful action: invitation for action.

Lesson implementation would emphasize the integration and development of the five language skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and culture (Omaggio Hadley, 2001). However, Van Duzer (1997) recommended emphasizing one of the language skills, more than the others, depending on the students' language needs. In her work, she presented the factors affecting the listening process. She explained how these factors could have repercussions while trying to communicate in the workplace setting.

Following her advice, literacy acquisition would be the focus for the learning sessions in our ESLWP. The students would learn reading strategies to be able to understand written material from their workplace environment. The employees with children or members of an extended family with children would be encouraged to read children's books and to share reading experiences with children at home. Both, learners and their children, would greatly benefit from this activity in the following manner: 1) The ESL employees would learn to enjoy reading, 2) They would also improve their reading comprehension skills, and 3) Their children would be provided with plenty of opportunities to be exposed to authentic and relevant literacy events.

In addition, in this ESLWP learners would engage with a variety of authentic written texts along with an exploration of several traditional second language basal readers (Lanteigne & Schwarzer, 1997). Finally, students' learning processes would be assessed through portfolios in order to provide insights into their achievements. Since this program was based on students' learning needs, the lessons would be approached from a holistic and a constructivist methodology. Consequently, alternative assessment seemed like the

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best choice available. In other words, assessment of the students' performance would focus on both process and product (Bell 2000; Noya & O'Malley 1994; McGroarty 1992).

Following is a description of the different stages of the development of our ESLWP: 1) Summary of theoretical principles for the design of the program; 2) Steps and guidelines for the development of the program; 3) Portfolios assessment as a central aspect to the program; and 4) Implications for other ESL methods class instructors.

1. Summary of theoretical principles for the design of the program

The theories that guided the design of the ESLWP were the following:

A. Definition of an inquiry-based curriculum: The curriculum should be an organizational device that teachers and learners use to think about their classrooms. It should be the means to discovery and learning about the lives they want to live and the people they want to become (Short et al., 1996; Whitin & Whitin, 1997; Schwarzer, 2001).

B. Curriculum negotiation: Typically, teachers, not learners, have made the important decisions about the learning experiences taking place in the class. Whitmore and Crowell (1994) introduced their concept of *symmetric power and trust relationships* between teachers and learners. They suggested that a negotiation of power between teacher and students is needed: Teachers trust and promote decision making from part of the learners in terms of curriculum implementatiowhile they determine the boundaries of the class negotiation. Students should be empowered in order to play a protagonist role in the decision making process.

C. Family literacy in adults' literacy development: Using children's literature in this ESLWP would help the ESL employees develop their emerging literacy skills while using authentic texts with authentic audiences. Reading books for the children in their extended family would both benefit the ESL employees as well as provide the children with rich literacy experiences. Children's literature is highly predictable since it uses repetitive language aided by illustrations. Based

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on the evidence from prior research (Flickinger, 1984; Smallwood, 1992), we decided to dedicate a big part of our literacy curriculum to children's literature.

D. Alternative assessment: Learning should be about change and growth. As teachers observe their students' progress and learning difficulties, there is room for students to evaluate their own learning (Schwarzer, 2001). Learners are multifaceted beings and they should be allowed to show their knowledge through different ways. Portfolio assessment (Noya and O'Malley, 1994) was intended to be implemented as an illustration of the alternative assessment focus of this innovative ESLWP. It was our opinion that the connection between the way learners are approaching knowledge and the way they are being evaluated should be coherent.

2. Steps and guidelines for the development of the program

This section is divided into two parts. The first part presents practical steps we found helpful in order to design and implement an ESLWP. The second part presents the guidelines we developed for the program. Nevertheless, we do not intend to provide the reader with a recipe to be followed, but with insights that might be transferred to other ESLWP situations.

Practical Steps for the implementation of the program

Following is the chronological account of the steps we suggest for the design of an ESLWP. Of course, a different order could be followed. We cannot generalize the procedure since the characteristics of each university and learning community are different.

***First**, create a set of guidelines for the program.* Remember to plan for a multi-level and multi-lingual group. Also, include activities dealing with the employees' routines at work. You might consider using technology and visual reinforcement. Finally, make literacy acquisition as the focus of the learning sessions. That is why it is important to collect and use specialized literacy material. Encourage the employees to read children's books and share reading with children at home.

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***Second**, design and conduct an informal interview with the prospective students.* This is one of the best ways to start negotiating course goals with the employers, the employees, and the instructors.

***Third**, design and administer a placement test.* Before classes start, the prospective students should be tested to determine the level of language ability. We suggest that the testing session should take place on the first day of class, taking no more than 30 minutes for each student.

***Fourth**, design and implement the actual program.* The program should be based on the employees' language needs. The program should be flexible to the schedules, needs, and interests of the employees. More importantly, it should be meaningful, contextualized, and authentic. The program should also promote collaborative work among the students and have a practical final test to give the students an appropriate sense of closure.

***Fifth**, read current bibliography on the topic.* It is important to notice that this step is not intended to be the last. Reading and reviewing the current literature is one of the most important steps in the design and implementation of the program.

3. Guidelines for the development of an ESLWP

The following is a synthesis of the principles suggested by Yvonne F. Stapp (1998) in order to design a curriculum for ESLWP. Stapp believes that such curriculum should:

- be generated from a general theoretical ESP framework and the instructor will design a specific methodology and curriculum that fits the students' needs,
- Include employers' and employees' language needs and course goals,
- start with a description of the objectives for the course,
- establish a general pedagogical sequence to ensure language skill development and a logical organization of the technical material. In other words, it should be flexible but well-organized, taking into account the limitations of work schedules,
- include activities dealing with the employees' routines at work,

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- make use of specialized literacy material from the workplace and make sure it is meaningful, realistic, and authentic,
- be a collaborative effort/product of employer, instructor, and employees,
- promote collaborative group work among the students,
- use accurate written/oral information,
- include varied teaching/learning techniques to help students develop the language skills (use of videotapes and audiocassettes). The instructor must plan for a multi-level and linguistically mixed group,
- provide visual reinforcement for the learning material,
- provide authentic communication,
- promote vocabulary, phrasing, and comprehension development,
- accommodate the various skill levels of the class,
- promote individual, pair, and group work activities, and
- have a "practical" final test.

Based on Stapp's suggestions, we developed our own set of guidelines that suited our program. Following are the guidelines we used in our conversations with the other university partners. Our ESLWP would:

1. focus on learners' needs in their daily work-routines such as language interactions and functions, interacting with clients and helping them, reading a menu from the cafeteria or labels of chemical products, etc.
2. target university employees for whom English is a second language
3. offer activities to develop the five language skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and culture,
4. address literacy issues in particular. Parents should be encouraged to read children's books and to share reading with their children at home. The learners and their children will both benefit from this activity,
5. focus on reading strategies for the ESL employees to enable them to understand written material from their workplace environment,
6. help the ESL employees learn to enjoy reading and to improve their reading comprehension,

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7. explore a variety of authentic written texts along with a compilation of traditional second language basal readers, and
8. follow holistic and constructivist approaches; lessons would provide hands-on activities.

It is important to reiterate that every ESLWP has different characteristics. Therefore, the guidelines presented above should not be followed as a recipe. They are intended to be a model for other designers of ESLWP and to be adapted to their own needs and settings. Finally, the guidelines should result from the negotiation between the parties involved (See the appendix for the checklist we provide for implementing an innovative ESLWP).

3. Portfolio assessment as a central aspect to the program

According to Noya & O'Malley (1994), historically portfolios display samples of an artist's work to illustrate the artist's work quality, interests, and abilities. However, in education we must refine this idea for educational purposes:

> Although portfolios using the model developed in the fine arts may be appropriate for illustrating student work, the model must be expanded to accommodate informational needs and assessment requirements of the classroom. A portfolio used for educational assessment must offer more than a showcase for student products; it must be the product of a complete assessment procedure that has been systematically planned, implemented and evaluated. A portfolio is a collection of a student's work, experiences, exhibitions, self-ratings (i.e., data), whereas portfolio assessment is the procedure used to plan, collect, and analyze the multiple sources of data maintained in the portfolio (p. 1).

Noya and O'Malley (1994) also suggest that any portfolio should have five characteristics: a) comprehensive, b) predetermined and systematic, c) informative, d) tailored, and e) authentic. They propose a portfolio assessment model for ESL that includes six interrelated levels of assessment activities: a) identify purpose and focus of portfolio, b) plan portfolio contents, c) design portfolio analysis, d) prepare for instruction, e) plan verification of procedures, and f) implement the model.

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Noya and O'Malley conclude their article by telling about the advantages and disadvantages of using portfolio in the language classroom. The advantages are: teachers' involvement in students' assessment is meaningful and active; portfolios promote serious discussion of criteria on what goes on in the classroom; portfolios link assessment to classroom activities; and assessment becomes a teaching strategy to improve learning. On the other hand, they point out validity and reliability as two weak aspects of portfolio assessment; the validation of portfolio procedures is costly and time consuming. Finally, portfolio implementation and assessment demand commitment, time, and effort on the part of teachers and school staff.

Padilla et al. (1996) also believe that:

"...The advantages of using portfolios are obvious. Portfolios provide students with opportunities to display good work, serve as a vehicle for critical self-analysis, and demonstrate mastery of a foreign [second] language" (p. 430).

Portfolio assessment is one instrument that allows teachers and students to reflect and negotiate students' performance in the classroom. It also provides students with opportunities to showcase growth over time and leads towards student-oriented teaching and independent students' work. As Moore (1994) states:

> Portfolio assessment and other authentic assessment procedures allow for self-directed work, self-correction, greater autonomy and greater time frames. Students can work outside the time constraints of the school timetable. Students are free to select topics in which they have personal interests, thus portfolios have the potential for encouraging greater motivation (p. 632).

Portfolio assessment empowers students as evaluators diminishing the value of "traditional" grades. It also encourages ESL employees to become critical and self-motivated language learners. Lastly, as an alternative method of assessment, portfolios fit best our interest for showcasing both product and process.

Contents of the portfolio:

As some authors (Padilla et al., 1996; O'Maley, 1994; Moore, 1994) have stated before, it is valuable for both teachers and students to establish some of the expected

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contents of the portfolios. As suggested by Pérez & Torres-Guzmán (2002), there are three main sections in a portfolio: a) written work such as initial and final drafts; b) audio- or video- tapes – of performance pieces such as students' oral reading and retellings; and c) other data and evidence such as students' self-analysis and critiques of items from peers.

Based on previous research on this topic, we decided to determine the following items as the compulsory table of contents for the portfolio in our program.

1. A **cover letter** that will contain basic information about the learners such as the name and a brief description of themselves as readers and writers.
2. A **table of contents** in order to register new items added to the portfolio.
3. **Required items:**
   - The list of books read to children at home.
   - Three tips about literacy development they would like to share with next year's students in the program.
   - Drafts of aural/oral and written products as well as revised versions.
4. **Optional items**: These should result from negotiation between teacher and students throughout the duration of the term. Following is a list of possible items:
   - Audiotaped versions of employees reading to children.
   - Role-playing dialogues based on workplace situations.
   - Evidence of peer review sessions throughout the term.
5. A **concluding statement** based on students' reflections and teacher-student conferences.

It is important to remember that the goal of our portfolio was not intended to be a collection of students' work, but rather a selection of it. Our purpose was to encourage students to select specific items to be included in their portfolio. Therefore, it was the teacher's priority to guide and lead the process. The portfolio was a compilation not limited to the students' best works and artifacts since their less successful items needed to be there for reflection and comparison purposes.

Implications for other ESL methods class instructors

This project could become one of the most exciting and useful projects for ESL methods instructors working at any large university with a sizeable non-English-speaking

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workforce and their graduate students. Although our particular ESLWP was never tried, tested, or even evaluated, the designers still believed it had great potential for other ESL instructors in their methods classes working in similar settings in the USA. The ESL graduate methods class could become a bridge between the university ESL employees' needs and the graduate students' needs. Following are some ideas we suggest in order to succeed in this endeavor:

1. Survey the needs of the local ESL community at your own institution. Contact the Human Resources Office and your local intensive English program for support.
2. Establish and design guidelines and goals that clearly explain the underlying philosophical and practical assumptions for your ESLWP.
3. Identify and make good use of available resources in order to integrate efforts and resources.
4. Review the current literature and see what insights can be transferable to your particular situation.
5. Start by interviewing ESL employees and find out what their second language 8/25/02needs are.
6. Remember that every ESLWP is unique. Therefore, expect to design or adapt assessment tools that fit your own program needs. Alternative assessments such as portfolios are highly desirable.

Even though the actual ESLWP did not take place, the designers learned a great deal about the key elements needed in order to implement such a program. It is our hope that some other ESL instructors working in similar settings as the one described throughout this paper find this account beneficial for their own practice.

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Appendix A Checklist for Implementing an Innovative ESLWP

- Do you use authentic materials for authentic purposes and with authentic audiences?
- Do you include authentic activities dealing with the employees' routines at work?
- Do you use specialized literacy materials?
- Do you negotiate the curriculum with the employees and the employers?
- Do you design the course goals with the input of the employers, employees, and teachers?
- Do you create environments that foster social construction of meaning?
- Do you plan for multi-level / multi-linguistically mixed groups?
- Do you promote collaborative work among the students?
- Do you assess students' products as well as processes?
- Do you have a "practical" final test?
- Do you teach the whole first and parts later?
- Do you use technology and visual reinforcements?
- Do you encourage students to take risks even if errors appear?
- Do you expose students to different local dialects of English present in their work environment?

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